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THE BANNER

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MR. PETER PUNCTILLO, THE GENTLEMAN IN BLACK.

BY HENRY MAYHEW.

(CONCLUDED.)

CHAPTER III.

Let us now return to our friend Frank Forge. On leaving the apartment of his lady-love, the sprightly punster made the best of his way to the office of the *Cheltenham Chronicle*, and having deposited his night of mirth in the editorial box of that journal, returned with all speed to his study in the Bell Hotel, where what was his surprise to find a letter upon the table bearing his address, and containing a small slip of paper commencing, "Victoria, by the grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Queen, Defender of the Faith to Frank Forge, greeting." Need we inform the learned reader, it was a writ!

"Egad," said the incorrigible Frank, "it is astonishing how formidable an instrument can be concocted out of such simple materials as the quill of a goose and the skin of a sheep. Here I am, poor devil, served with what the rascally attorneys call a *meane process*—and a particularly mean process it is, most assuredly."

However, set a thief to catch a thief, says the old adage, and, in conformity with the reverend maxim, our jocose friend despatched an envoy for the immediate attendance of one of the profession, to consult him as to the best means of resisting (or putting off until such times as he could arrange his marriage with the fair Cecilia) this most courteous and Duvall-like attack upon your money or your liberty.

Our lively friend Frank was anxiously expecting a visit from his legal adviser, when Mr. Peter Punctillo, following the rough directions of Miss Sally, tapped at the door of Mr. Forge's apartment; Frank no sooner saw the sombre suit of Mr. Punctillo than he inwardly exclaimed,

"A gentleman in black—this must be the very man—I believe sir," said he to Mr. Punctillo, "you have come about this suit."

Now, unfortunately for Mr. Punctillo the term used by Mr. Forge was a very ambiguous one, so that while our lively friend was alluding to one kind of suit, our sombre friend naturally imagined his interrogation referred to another, and accordingly grew rather poetical and said,

"Certainly, sir, as Othello says, it is the word in the legal sense, of course, but the worst is the—d causes are so intimately connected with your effects, the one is sure to go with the other—hal! hal! Not so, of course, that I'm thinking—eh, old fellow?"

Mr. Peter Punctillo was astonished; he did not understand the joke, and muttered to himself, "Very strange. What can he mean, I wonder?"

"But you are tired, sir, no doubt; pray be seated," said Frank, offering the gentleman in black a chair, of which he had no sooner availed himself than the eternal punster added, "case of a rest as they say in the law. Come, I've heard worse than that in my time."

The supposed limb of that profession laughed—not at the joke, but because his companion did.

"Touching the present business," continued the facetious Mr. Forge, "I believe you are aware how far matters have gone already."

"Why, if I mistake not, returned Mr. Punctillo, 'there is an attachment at present existing.'"

"Ah! he means the writ of attachment, returned Frank in an undertone. 'Perfectly right, sir. Now, I presume, the first step you intend to take will be to enter an appearance.'"

"Enter an appearance!—that is, make my debt before the lady," said the gentleman in black, aside. "Certainly, sir," he added, addressing the punster, "the first thing that I shall do will be to enter an appearance—and, thought he, as he took a glance at his habilitations, 'a very imposing appearance I shall make when I do enter.'"

"Ay," responded Frank, "and then I suppose will come the declaration."

Mr. Punctillo, intimidated by a nod of the head that such was the course he intended to adopt.

"And after the declaration," continued Mr. Forge, "I presume you will then go on to plead; but for that, I have added, I suppose you will require some counsel."

"Sir," replied Mr. Punctillo, "I am always happy to have counsel upon any subject. Have you any to offer?"

"Why, sir, I think now it would materially assist the case, if you could manage to get Wilde."

"Get Wilde! Oh, he means to throw in a bit of passion," thought Mr. Punctillo. "Truly sir, said he, 'that I have no doubt, would be a grand point.'"

"But that rests entirely with you. And then, sir, having pleaded, I suppose, you will proceed to join."

"Such is certainly my intention."

"And having joined, the issue will come as a matter of course."

"The issue?" exclaimed the astonished Mr. Punctillo, shocked at the mere mention of such a subject.

"And about what time after joining do you think we shall have the issue?" continued Mr. Forge.

"Why, the usual time," replied the perplexed Mr. Punctillo.

"The usual time—ay, but, unfortunately, I am so ignorant upon these matters, that, hang me! if I know what is the usual time in such cases."

"Then, sir, all that I can say is," replied the gentleman in black, "that you are one of the most innocent beings for your time of life that I ever met with."

"That may be; but you see, sir, I want particularly the exact time—some few weeks, I believe, is it not?"

"Some few weeks!" blurted out the bewildered gentleman. Well, d—n me, if he is not the veriest nincompoop I ever heard of! Some few weeks indeed—months you mean."

"Months!" exclaimed the equally astonished Mr. Forge, "you surely must be mistaken, sir, as there must be a great alteration in the law."

"You must be well aware, sir, that is a law which no one can alter."

"Well, sir, I submit to your superior judgment," said Frank, "you of course must know more about these matters than I—must have had some hundreds of issues in your time."

"I had some hundreds of issues! What the devil do you take me for?"

"Take you?" replied Frank, why, a lawyer, to be sure."

"A lawyer!—nonsense. I'm no lawyer—no doctor either."

"The deuce you're not! Egad! I've made a slight mistake then, I suppose. However, it was natural; for, seeing you dressed all in black, I mistook you for a limb of the law."

"Mistook me for the devil!" exclaimed the enraged Mr. Punctillo.

"No, pardon me sir," replied Frank, "only for one of the family. However, sir, since you are no lawyer, who are you, and what is your business here?"

"I am Mr. Peter Punctillo, of Change Alley, Cornhill, and the cause of my visit was to gain some information respecting Mr. Solid's ward, to whom I am about to be united."

"The deuce you are!" thought Frank. "So! you are my rival," said he to himself. "Egad! this is better luck than I had anticipated—this is some of Cecilia's doings, certainly. Now, if I can only send him on some fool's errand, that will occupy him half an hour or so, she's mine beyond a doubt. I have it, by Jupiter! I'll pack him off to Miss Hollyhock's—"

the lady who was pitched out of the phreton this morning—she's just been removed to her own house, and that's a good mile and a half, at least. The idea had no sooner entered the head of our facetious friend than, turning toward Mr. Punctillo, he said, "it was perfectly right, sir. Mr. Solid and his ward were stopping at the hotel, until within a few days past, but they have now removed a short distance, and are residing at Miss Hollyhock's, Hollyhock Hall, about three quarters of a mile on the Bath road."

"Thank you, sir—Miss Dollymop's, Dollymop Hall, I think you said?"

"No, sir, pardon me—Hollyhock, Hollyhock Hall. Any person will put you in the way of it."

Hollyhock—I shall remember—three quarters of a mile on the Bath road. Egad! must lose no time or I shall break an appointment for the first time in my life. I have now only to thank you for your politeness, and wish you a very good morning."

"A stupid puppy," he muttered, as he made a profound bow to the gentleman and quitted the room, "to take me for a lawyer—a lawyer, indeed!—a fellow whose black suit is but the liveliest of the infernal master he serves."

Frank Forge burst into a violent fit of laughter after his precise rival had taken his leave, and having cut one joke at the old gentleman's expense, hastened to claim the fulfilment of Mr. Solid's engagement.

CHAPTER IV.

Let us now take a peep at the interior of the house to which Mr. Punctillo was hastily directing his steps.

The evening was fast drawing on—for it was at the latter end of October last, that the events here narrated occurred—and Hodge, Miss Hollyhock's man, as he was rather equivocally styled by his neighbors, was in the hall busily engaged in preparing the lamp for the night duty.

"Well, dang it," said Hodge, providing the burner with a fresh cotton, and rummaging upon his mistress's accident, "but this is a deadly awkward job, surely. Who'd a thought an old blind beetle running away with anything, now let alone a man!"

He thought, on old blind beetle running away with anything, now let alone a man!"

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I guess I know what you be come about, too, old gentleman."

"Oh, you do, do you?" he returned, "then thank Heaven, I'm all right at last."

"You be come a bit Miss, to be sure—I'm up to snuff," and Hodge gave him a rather unceremonious nudge of the elbow.

"Indeed—rather strange they should make their servants acquainted with such matters. Then you have been expecting me?"

"To be sure I have—you, and a dozen more on ye."

"A dozen more?" invited some friends to meet me I dare say," thought Mr. P.—"What, you are going to have a party here are you?"

"Ees, I suppose so. There generally be rather a strong party, you know, in such cases, eh? old chap."

"Oh, certainly; it's the usual custom. He has a very unpleasant manner, this fellow, said Mr. P. aside."

"Ay, and so you determined to come early, eh? and try to get the promise before the others arrived. Oh, you're a deep old fellow, that you be."

"Get the promise of marriage, I presume he means."

"Now, wouldn't thee like the performing on the ceremony—eh, old chap?"

Mr. Punctillo imagined this to allude to the nuptials, of course, and replied, "Certainly that is the object of my wishes."

"Devil doubt thee," returned Hodge with a familiar poke of the ribs; "thee'd get a pretty penny by it now, wouldn't thee?"

The gentleman thought it like his impertinence, and merely replied that he supposed he should be no loser by the affair.

"I'll be bound thee wouldn't; thee ben't the man to work for nothing, I know."

"Work for nothing!" muttered Mr. P. This fellow's impudence is past bearing; but I'll put an end to this. And so saying he took his card case from his coat pocket, and tendering one of his cards to Hodge, said, "There is my card, and be pleased to take it up stairs."

Hodge grinned knowingly at his visitor, and, without offering to lay a finger to the small bit of paste-board extended to him, exclaimed, "I thought it 'ud come to that. So! that's your card, be it?—and ye want I to take it up stairs, do ee? I'll tell thee what now, old gentleman, I'll see thee d—d fast."

"See me d—d fast?" cried Mr. Punctillo, do you know whom you're speaking to?"

"Ees, to be sure I do; and I'll tell thee that I know thee, and thee don't take thyself off without any more bother, I will make thee want an undertaker thyself before I've done with thee. And Hodge threw himself into an attitude which seemed to forebode a breach of the peace."

"What is the meaning of all this?" demanded Mr. Punctillo.

"Why, that a man of thy years ought to be ashamed on himself, so he ought, to come here for such a purpose as thee hast."

"What is my purpose to you, sir? There is my card, with my name and address upon it—will you take it or not?"

"I told thee afore I'd see thee d—d fast—don't want nothing to do with your card, I know what's on it well enough—Nicholas Cannibal, or some such name—coffin maker and undertaker—funerals performed on the most reasonable terms."

"Nicholas Cannibal, coffin maker and undertaker! What does the booby mean?"

"What do thee mean to have the face to tell that thee didn't come hither to try and bury miss, eh?"

"Bury miss! I came here, exclaimed the bewildered Punctillo, 'to bury no miss, but to marry one.'"

"What and thee ben't not of them undertaking rascals really?"

"Devil on an undertaker, am I?"

"Well, dang it, but this be a pretty mistake o' thine, Hodge," said that person to himself. "Hows'er, it were quite natural, you know, master; for seeing you dressed all in black, I in course took you for an undertaker."

"An undertaker! First to be mistaken for a doctor, then a lawyer, and then an undertaker, and all because I happened to be dressed in black—devil take the black, I say!"

"Well, I ax, your pardon, sir, for the mistake; but, la bless ye, thee did look so deadly like one of them death-hunters, thee can't blame I for it. Besides, who'd a thought thee'd have come a love-making to a lady who's more like to want a windingsheet than a wedding gown?"

"Gracious heavens!—what, then, is the ward of Mr. Solid dangerously ill?"

"No, but Miss Hollyhock be."

"The devil take Miss Hollyhock!" roared out the enraged Mr. Punctillo; "what is Miss Hollyhock to me? Was there ever such a blundering booby as this! I tell you I came here to pay my addresses to the ward of Mr. Solid—can I see the lady?"

"Miss Hollyhock da live here, sir."

"I tell you I have got nothing, and want nothing to do with your Miss Hollyhock. Does not Mr. Solid live here?—answer me that."

"La! bless your innocent heart," replied Hodge, "no! Mr. Solid do live at No. 10, the Bell Hotel, down in the town, to be sure; and I do know, coz misses was took there after the accident."

"A pretty fool, then, that puppy has made of me, most assuredly—and made me break my appointment into the bargain. It 'ud serve him right if I was to break his head in return.—No, 10, I think you said?"

"Ees, that be it, sure enough. Hows'er, I'll come with thee, and show thee the very place, if thee likes, for I've got to call at Dr. Potions, close by."

"Ah, that will prevent the possibility of any further mistake. Only show me to Mr. Solid's and I will make you a present of a guinea."

"Not will thee, now? Come along, then for money do make the mare to go surely."

"Do you lead the way," said Mr. Punctillo. "The stupid dolt!—to mistake me for an undertaker—a fellow that puts on black clothes as a pall wherein to bury the joy he feels at other people's woe."

Leaving Mr. Punctillo to retrace his steps under the guidance of Hodge to the Bell Hotel, let us now return to the apartments of Mr. Solid.

CHAPTER V.

Frank Forge, immediately after he had despatched the gentleman in black on the errand above narrated, sped to the fair Cecilia, and acquainted her with the success that had attended their plans.

The tender couple waited until it was a full quarter past the time appointed by the precise Mr. Punctillo, and then hastened to demand from Mr. Solid the fulfilment of his engagement."

"Well, well," replied that gentleman, "I must acknowledge I am fairly beaten, and I must keep my word, I suppose."

"Yes, sir," returned the vivacious Frank, "you had better keep your word in this instance, in case you should want to give it to any one on a future occasion. That will do, I think for an extempore."

"Ah!" exclaimed Cecilia, "I thought my good guardian would not hesitate to fulfil his promise. You will give your countenance to our union now, won't you, sir?"

"Yes, you will of course give your countenance to our union," said Mr. Forge, and so put a good face on the matter.—"Come, that isn't so bad, either."

"You are a strange fellow," replied Mr. Solid, smiling at the jocular compliment, "and I think your heart is in the right place."

"Right place!" returned Frank; "I fancy it is, too, since my dear little Cecilia has the possession of it."

Cecilia blushed beautifully, of course.

"There, say no more about it," said Mr. Solid. "Give me your hand, sir—Cecilia, yours. Take her," he added joining their palms, "and mind and treat her kindly."

And now, the sooner this affair is settled, the better," remarked Mr. Solid; "so run you, Mr. Forge, and send Mr. Splice, the clergyman, to me. You know where he lives—only a few doors down the street, and I will arrange the wedding-day with him; and you, Cecilia, can, if you like, put on your bonnet and accompany Mr. Forge; for it would be a pity to separate you at this moment."

"Come, then, Cecilia," cried Mr. F., "for I am as anxious for the performance of the bridal ceremony as your guardian himself. The bridal ceremony!—Yes! a *bridal* ceremony it is most assuredly, for it generally puts a curb upon one for the rest of one's days. That will do to go out with, I flatter myself, and Cecilia, having slipped on her *chapeau de paille*, Mr. Forge and she hastened towards the priest of Hymen, and left Mr. Solid to his thoughts."

"Well," he said, turning the affair over in his mind, "I am fairly caught in my